

## Article in *Agenda* Newsletter – January 2005

### Exploring the Meaning Of Ageing: Annual Conference of the Australian Association of Gerontology

The Annual Conference of the Australian Association of Gerontology (AAG) in November 2005, at the Gold Coast was a showcase for ageing research in Australia. Papers presented covered the many interrelated disciplines that affect how we understand and respond to ageing today. The AAG aims to promote cross disciplinary research and communication and the Conference included presentations of current research into the biology of ageing, clinical practice, aged care, community care, data collection and analysis, community care, home support and indigenous ageing, models of care, active ageing and the economics of ageing.

The keynote conference speaker was professor Jon Pynoos from the Andrus Center of Gerontology at the University of Southern California. He has a particular interest in home modification for community living. Dr Norman Swan, well known to ABC listeners, delivered a paper on the Medical Research Score Card . He used a historical case study (finding a cause for Tuberculosis) to demonstrate the importance of a multi-disciplinary approach to ageing research.

Indigenous ageing was a key theme at the Conference. The fact that in indigenous communities patterns of ageing are more characteristic of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, rather than current times (high birthrates and early death) was highlighted in a keynote session. Other papers included the presentation of current work to develop the Kimberley Indigenous Cognitive Assessment tool, which was complemented by a role play focusing on the ethical and practical issues of research in indigenous communities. One paper simply titled *Where are all the Koori Baby boomers?* summed up the particular problems of indigenous ageing.

Papers were presented on the likelihood that high lipids may promote Alzheimer's Disease, on the role of caloric restriction in promoting longevity and on the effect that ageing has on gene expression in ageing hearts. Amongst more than thirty papers presented on aspects of clinical care were the positive role of exercise and nutrition programs, dementia care, practice guidelines for palliative care and the role of specific therapies to relieve boredom or reduce fatigue. The causes and prevention of falls was also covered in a number of papers that included a new predictive test. One symposium addressed the potential for online technology to assist in care with geriatric consultations, both in community and RACF settings

Care in acute and sub-acute settings was also a strong focus. A statistical review of the reasons for and outcomes of domiciliary consultations by one particular geriatrician showed 47% of visits resulted in a change of medication but just 3% lead to placement in residential care. This has implications for our health service delivery models.

The role of social engagement in promoting well being in older people was highlighted in many papers, with one presenting a predictor for mild depression in rural males. The important role of physical activity to healthy ageing was another major theme. Research was presented on the value of strength and conditioning programs and on the barriers to physical activity. Similarly, the importance of psychological factors was emphasised, with papers discussing the link between executive functioning and falls and between aerobic fitness and working memory. This reinforces the view that the key to healthy ageing is strongly multi-disciplinary with powerful interactions between mind and body.

Our ageing workforce was a major theme with papers looking at the political and ethical issues associated with longer working years. One paper, unusually combined economic and psychological factors to identify the consumer preferences for retirement and the psychological and economic predictors of workforce participation. Other studies on health during the transition from work to retirement and on the negative impact of obesity on workforce participation straddled the divide between examination of workforce issues and consideration of the need for healthy, socially engaged, ageing.

Other economic papers included discussion of ageing and the future of Medicare. One paper implied that retirement income policy was of limited impact. Several papers showed the limited retirement planning undertaken by baby boomers. This combined with an expectation of government support has significant implications for policy makers. Key seminars on housing covered those with assets (the role of home equity mortgages), those always in the rental market, those who move on to retirement villages and the intention (or non intention) of baby boomers to pass on their housing wealth to children. Another symposium focussed on the management of assets. It recognised that older people will have more assets and challenged assumptions about inter-generational relationships. The limited role of legal systems in detecting financial abuse of some older people was discussed.

Papers on aspects of access to health and aged care in Indonesia, Taiwan, and Malaysia along with a papers on social engagement in Osaka were a positive indication of expanding links within the SEA region.

Population health research included the health of centenarians, longitudinal studies and socioeconomic differentials across disability levels. A series of papers addressed the key statistical factors affecting the care of older people when in hospital or when moving between settings. One presentation provided quantitatively data to support earlier suspicions that dependency in RACF is increasing.

In addition to presentation of research papers, the conference was a venue for policy and practice review. It included debates, forums and round table discussions.

Those interested in more detail on the papers can view the abstracts at <http://www.cota.org.au/aja/aja.htm> or through [www.aag.asn.au](http://www.aag.asn.au). Some presenters chose to publish their papers in full and copies of these are available at [www.aag.asn.au](http://www.aag.asn.au) or by contacting [executiveofficer@aag.asn.au](mailto:executiveofficer@aag.asn.au).

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